

By [Sarah Kraybill](#), [Grist Magazine](#). Posted [November 5, 2005](#).

A collection of environmental, political, and academic leaders share their unique visions for reconstructing the Big Easy post-Katrina.

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Unless you've been living under a rock -- and these days, we can't say we'd blame you -- you've probably put at least a smidgen of thought toward the fate of New Orleans.

It's a rare thing to reconstruct an American city from scratch (though we can think of a few more cities we'd put on the list). There are some who advocate letting bygones be bygones, allowing the name and character of The Big Easy to fade into days of yore, but most people support the eventual rebuilding of the city. The question is, how should it be done, and to what end? We think it should be called New-New Orleans, because that's fun to say, but after that we're stumped.

Instead of racking our comparatively small brains for answers, we turned to a collection of environmental, political, and academic leaders who have bright ideas. We asked them all the same question: What's the one thing you'd most like to see occur as part of the rebuilding of New Orleans?

Their answers ranged from building green to building on barges, from processing with residents to procuring ponies. Read on for inspiration.

Christie Todd Whitman

There's been such a deluge of money, resources, and technical expertise -- I hope that local authorities take just a modicum of time to thoughtfully plan and apply smart-growth principles to the redevelopment effort. For starters, it's quite clear that there's been a lot of development in the wrong places -- not just in low-lying neighborhoods, but also along the barrier islands and coastal wetlands

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that historically have dampened the impact of storm surges. Local and state officials should seriously consider declaring some of those areas off-limits to development as part of a long-term strategy to restore those natural barriers, and instead encourage more compact development in suitable areas to ensure that there's no net loss of existing homes or potential for new construction.

How we plan and design those new communities is also critical. An obvious priority would be to avoid recreating past mistakes, such as concentrating poor families in just a few wards and isolating them from the greater prosperity of the region. I'm also concerned that we're going to see vast areas of new sprawl development in the rush to rebuild -- exactly the wrong type of development for a time when infrastructure dollars and buildable land are in short supply. Instead, we need compact "walking neighborhoods" that feature a mix of market-rate and affordable housing, convenient transportation choices, and easy access to jobs, medical services, and other daily needs. Smart planning and an open public process can deliver those outcomes. The future of so many families depends on it.

[Christie Todd Whitman](#) was the administrator of the U.S. EPA from 2001 to 2003 and co-chairs the national advisory council of [Smart Growth America](#).

Ari Kelman

I suppose the right answer is that I hope poverty and racism -- root rather than proximate causes of disaster -- will be washed away in the outpouring of concern following Katrina. And while I'm stumping to become Miss America, I'd also like every child along the Gulf Coast to have a pony. A really friendly pony that never bites. And can fly.

Inappropriate humor aside, the truth is we're already starting to forget Katrina. There's Supreme Court nominees to squabble over, indictments to ponder, and tears to shed for earthquake victims. Add to that the fact that New Orleans is among the most complicated urban ecosystems in the nation, and it becomes harder still to imagine that we'll maintain our focus for the years it will take to rebuild the city.

It's that last point, about the complexity of the urban fabric in New Orleans, that leads me to what I really hope will come out of this: people should stop trying to separate social and environmental issues as they rebuild. Cities are not simply human artifacts. Nor, of course, are they wholly natural. They're both: networks of human and non-human intermingled, prone to feedback loops across the nature/culture divide.

So rebuild New Orleans on a more solid foundation: the understanding that it's futile to separate cities into compartmentalized zones -- people here, nature there. Such antiquated thinking left New Orleans vulnerable over time, and then under water. Now wring out the city and rebuild it, acknowledging that people must live together with nature. This might yield sustainable urban spaces and a kind of environmental justice. Failing that, ponies are really soft -- and we can ride them out of town when disaster next strikes. Because it will, and if the past is prelude there won't be any gas left for our cars.

Ari Kelman teaches history at the University of California-Davis. He is the author of A River and Its City: The Nature of Landscape in New Orleans.

Na'Taki Osborne

My greatest hope for the rebuilding of New Orleans is for equity and justice. In the short term, assistance should be given to help low-income citizens and families attain affordable housing units.

In the long term, permanent, affordable housing must be developed so that all who desire to come back to New Orleans have the opportunity to do so. This long-term strategy should build on principles of mixed-income housing distributed equitably across New Orleans, and should go against policies that promote the concentration of poverty in areas "undesirable" to live in by some.

Historically, African-Americans were isolated to the swampy, low-lying areas, while rich whites built on higher ground. All citizens, regardless of race and class, should be given equal opportunity to live in both the urban and suburban areas of New Orleans, in proximity to jobs and with an adequate transportation system to get from home to work, school, and other services. As the rebirth of the city begins, it is imperative that we learn from past mistakes, starting with reconnecting with nature and building New Orleans back in an ecologically sound manner that works with the forces of nature and not against them. Extensive environmental cleanup is needed immediately, and all neighborhoods must have parks and open space.

People of color and poor people should not be concentrated in proximity to a proliferation of toxic waste and other pollution-generating facilities, or vice versa. People displaced by Hurricane Katrina were suffering before the storm touched down and before the levee broke. They were living in poverty and pollution before this natural tragedy. This injustice must not be sustained.

Equality of economic opportunities is also paramount in terms of jobs and contracts connected to the redesign, rebuilding, and cleanup of the city. Jobs in all sectors must conform to the practice of giving people living wages for their work. And citizens must lead the planning process -- all residents of New Orleans, from the Garden District to the Ninth Ward, deserve to and must be involved in transforming the rubble and remains to an economically vibrant, environmentally sustainable, healthy, livable community.

[Na'Taki Osborne](#), who grew up in the area between New Orleans and Baton Rouge known as Cancer Alley, is the national leadership development coordinator at the National Wildlife Federation.

Jacques Leslie

With its vast size and overwhelming destructiveness, Katrina seemed to herald an unprecedented era of hydrological menace, but New Orleans' story is distressingly old. Indeed, as I watched the city's

submersion and subsequent disarray, I felt as if I knew the plot, for I'd just finished writing a book about dams. Over little more than half a century, large dams have displaced between 40 million and 80 million people: a population that is often indigenous, usually poor, and invariably disregarded by authorities.

Both dams' construction and levees' collapse scatter victims from their homes -- usually to unwanted land, where they go hungry, or to the fringes of cities, where they become day laborers and beggars. The dam resettlers' loss is for the nation's good, say the dam builders; New Orleans' "underprivileged" inhabitants will be better off, says Barbara Bush.

In New Orleans, as with dam resettlement, only one course is just: make the victims the first beneficiaries of the recovery. Whatever jobs and contracts are offered, the uprooted get first crack at them. What companies flourish must support vital institutions such as hospitals and schools. The least that the victims deserve is a stake in the outcome: ask them what they want, and heed the answers.

Jacques Leslie has written for Harper's, Mother Jones, and The New York Times Magazine, and is the author of Deep Water: The Epic Struggle Over Dams, Displaced People, and the Environment.

Sarah Kraybill is an editorial intern at Grist.

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Cautious

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First, 40% of those forced out say they will not be returning, so whatever is rebuilt can be a helluva lot smaller. These 40% likely didn't have much of a home or job, and perhaps where they are they can start anew. We've split up the gangs; let's leave them split.

What's bothersome to me is that Alaskan contractors are getting contracts to rebuild New Orleans, obviously thanks to their close (and moneyed) relationship with Rep. Don Young (of the "Bridge to Nowhere" fame). He still plans to fight to keep these bridges (obviously thanks to his close - and moneyed - connection to the road contractors).

Whatever is restored in New Orleans should be restored by the locals who need the jobs more than

Don Young's contributors. And even then we should not rebuild in the low-lying areas that mother nature has claimed for herself. But before we start sending money to a corrupt city and state government we best send a qualified management team to oversee the project (FEMA, we need you to stay in D.C.).

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